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Living the Mystery: Doctrine, Intellectual Disability, and Christian Imagination

Medi Ann Volpe

THIS ESSAY CONSIDERS THE ROLE of doctrine in spiritual and moral growth by examining the way it connects teaching, mystery and imagination. Contemplating the mystery of our salvation, I suggest, fosters humility, reminding us that what we *see* (physically or with the mind's eye) is not all that *is*. For the “rationally capacious,”¹ Christian teaching guides the constant giving-over of imagination and attention to the work of remembering Jesus faithfully.² Not every person requires this same blessing from doctrine, however. The question about how doctrine functions, specifically with respect to those who cannot grasp its technical or abstract principles, frames the discussion. The core of the analysis concerns the function of doctrine, yet my conclusion is fundamentally practical: doctrine builds up the body of Christ.

A question I was asked when I was a teaching assistant at Duke provides a good point of departure. The student (a bright MDiv student, who has since earned a PhD and embarked on his own academic career) wanted to know what the real problem was with Arianism. On his view, the Christian life consisted in an orientation to the world summed up (usually) in the idea of “following Jesus.” To follow Jesus implied, in its turn, a set of practices corresponding to a

¹ For discussion of the “rationally capacious” and the image of God, see Peter Andrew Comensoli, “Recognising Persons: The Profoundly Impaired and Theological Anthropology” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Edinburgh, 2011), 264-267.

² The amount of space-clearing and place-holding required is different for each of us, depending on how much extraneous or erroneous stuff we have accumulated in our minds, and the work of clearing that space is different, depending on how skillful we are at wielding the necessary tools. But this is quite complicated: it may be that because of our upbringing, we’ve accumulated a good deal of nonsense where our ideas of God ought to be, but because of the limitations of our intellectual faculties, we are not able to wield the necessary tools with enough skill. I want to be clear from the outset that words like ‘anathema’ or ‘heresy’ are inappropriate in such cases. Childish understandings of God that linger because of intellectual incapacity are not blameworthy. I know it is not nice to say, in an era in which every child is taught to nurture the same expectations, but it is true. Not every person will have the same needs or abilities intellectually. The real problem is not that there is this discrepancy, but that we have mistakenly come to value intelligence and intellectual achievement above the virtues intelligence ought to serve.

social ethic tied closely to the Gospels and often perceived as relatively independent from dogmatic concerns.³ The Arian heresy did not appear to affect any of the practices integral to Christian life. Could you not carry on the path of discipleship without bothering with the technical intricacies of a doctrine we find difficult to articulate and impossible to grasp fully? Later, when my daughter was born with Down Syndrome, the question took on a new aspect: does a failure to grasp Christian doctrines like the Trinity prevent someone from being a true Christian?

Although I did not realize it at the time, the question opened up a persistent fissure in relating doctrine and ethics, one that the rule function of doctrine has been unable to bridge.⁴ I knew instinctively that it mattered profoundly: somehow our salvation was at stake in these technical intricacies. I had begun to see that our understanding of who Jesus is, and the nature of our salvation in Christ, would be undermined completely without the doctrine of the Trinity. The First Council of Nicaea in 325 did not anathematize Arius' belief "that there was a time that he [the Son of God] was not" as a matter of semantics.⁵ But are these technical descriptions of the second person of the Trinity really so very important for us *all* to get right? After all, the vast majority of Christians are not theologians, and the Arian controversy bears little relationship to their experience of God or their imitation of Christ. Is it not possible to "confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead" (Romans 10:9) and so be saved without grasping such esoteric distinctions in Trinitarian theology?

The short answer is yes: we can certainly put our faith in Jesus without having any knowledge whatsoever of the Arian controversy, or grasping fully the import of the language of the creeds. But it does not follow from that reality of Christian discipleship that doctrines, even the most technical and esoteric points of doctrine, do not matter for Christian practice. The Arian controversy was not about technical language, nor was it merely a struggle for power within the young Church.⁶ The debate was about how best to describe and contemplate

³ Such a perception might develop, for example, by reading an essay like Stanley Hauerwas's "Jesus: The Story of the Kingdom," *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 36-52, in isolation from the rest of his work and his sources.

⁴ I make this argument in my *Rethinking Christian Identity: Doctrine and Discipleship* (Oxford, UK: Wiley, 2013), especially 12-20.

⁵ For discussion of the anathemas, see JND Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3rd edition (New York: Continuum, 1972), 211.

⁶ See Rowan Williams, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, Second Edition (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2002), 233-245; Robert C. Gregg and Dennis Groh, *Early Arianism: A View of Salvation*; and Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 15-20.

the God who saves us, to whom the Scriptures bear witness. Over the course of the fourth century, the young Church came to see that salvation in Christ depends upon Jesus being God the Incarnate Word. The Church articulated ever more clearly the doctrine of the Trinity in the ongoing effort to make sense of God in light of the coming of Jesus Christ. Every Christian doctrine is in some measure involved in the task of setting forth the Church's faith in the God who came to save us in the person of Christ.⁷

My exploration of the territory begins in the catechetical instruction of Gregory of Nyssa, a fourth century bishop. Although the question I ask is not Gregory's question, he can nonetheless guide our thinking about the place of doctrine in Christian life. Gregory's instruction centers on how the doctrine of the Trinity should be taught and suggests its key function in the life of a new believer. The second half of the essay focuses on this aspect of doctrine and argues that mystery not only teaches us how to regard God but also to regard as sacred God's image in every human being. Truly to take this belief to heart and practice it in everyday life is part of the reformation of our patterns of attention as we seek to imitate Christ and to grow in the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and love.

CATECHESIS: LEARNING TO GRASP THE MYSTERY

The Holy Spirit is the primary agent in the creation and sustenance of Christian discipleship. Church doctrine and our profession of faith are examples of responses to God's saving work. Catechesis draws us into the mystery of God, teaching us to hold in tension the truth of what we believe (for example, that God is Trinity) with our inability fully to comprehend that truth (since we cannot grasp how God is three and God is one). As the Spirit bestows faith, hope, and love on Christians, doctrine shapes the imagination to receive these gifts. The more fertile and expansive our imaginations, the more tending they require to ensure healthy growth.

My first step in disclosing the relationship between doctrine and Christian discipleship is to return to the controversial and theologically fruitful period of the early Church. After the Council of Constantinople (381), the creed we now call 'Nicene' was promulgated. Gregory of Nyssa was one of the (six) bishops commended to the Church at large as interpreters of the creed.⁸ If a

⁷ For a clear and convincing account of the "affective salience" of Melancthon's account of forensic justification, which resonates with my argument here, see Simeon Zahl, "On the Affective Salience of Doctrine," *Modern Theology* 31, no. 3 (2015): 428-444.

⁸ See "Biography," in *The Brill Dictionary of Gregory of Nyssa*, eds. L. F. Mateo Seco and G. Maspero (Leiden, Netherlands: Brill, 2010).

bishop wanted to know what the creed, or a portion of it, meant, he could confidently consult Gregory of Nyssa. To that end, Gregory wrote a treatise sometimes called *The Great Catechism*⁹ to those who were preparing catechumens for baptism.

Gregory grounds his catechetical instruction in the doctrine of the Trinity. The faith into which catechumens will be baptized is faith in the Trinity, so the first part of his guidance for catechists consists in a clear and apologetic account of the Christian God. In specific conversation with those who would oppose his account of God, Gregory sets out the key points of the doctrine. The logic of the very idea of God, he reasons, points to the oneness of God. But the Hebrew Scriptures suggest that the one God is not a monolith. Using Psalm 33:6 as his key text, Gregory shows that the “Word of the Lord” and “the Breath of his mouth” by which the heavens were made point us to distinctions within the Godhead.¹⁰

Gregory goes on to provide a detailed account of the doctrine of the Trinity that has two key aims. The first of these is, as I have indicated, apologetic. God is Trinity: the Scriptures and our reasoned reflection upon them should draw us to that conclusion. Because God is Trinity, we can say that the Word is God, and it is because Jesus is the Incarnate Word that he can save us. The second aim is epistemological. Even as Gregory examines the evidence and draws carefully-reasoned conclusions, he insists that the doctrine of the Trinity only traces the outline of an impenetrable mystery. “In effect,” Gregory writes,

a studied examination of the depths of this mystery does, in a veiled way, give [one] a fair, inward apprehension of our teaching on the knowledge of God. [One] cannot, of course, express the depth of the mystery in words, how the same thing is subject to a number and yet escapes it; how it is observed to have distinctions and is yet grasped as a unity; how it admits distinction of Persons and yet is not divided in essence.¹¹

The confidence *that* God is Trinity should not be confused with any inkling of *how* God is Trinity. We do not comprehend God; we only make sense of God through our interpretation of the Scriptures. Gregory might well have agreed with Karl Barth’s famous dictum that

⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, “An Address on Religious Instruction,” in *Christology of the Later Fathers*, ed. and trans., Cyril Richardson (Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 1954), 268-325.

¹⁰ Gregory, “An Address,” 274-275. In the section immediately prior to section three (270-274), Gregory has argued that God must have *logos* and that *logos* cannot be uttered without *pneuma*.

¹¹ Gregory, “An Address,” 273-74.

the revelation of God in Christ hides as much as it reveals.¹² Jesus reveals truly, but we see in a glass darkly. The epistemological point here is that we *cannot come to know exactly how God is God*. Our perception is limited by the fact that we are creatures. The uncreated God remains beyond the grasp of our knowledge.

I hasten to add, however, that God's transcendence does not distance God from creation. Rather, for Gregory, the distinction in essence between God and creatures is absolute because "[o]therwise we could not conceive of the power that governs the universe as equally pervading all things."¹³ God's difference from creation allows God to be present to all creation immediately and fully.¹⁴ Christian faith thus involves holding in tension a firm belief *that* God was in Christ, reconciling the world to himself, with the humble admission that we cannot understand *how*. It is a mystery.

According to Gregory, the candidate for baptism should have a solid grasp of the "mystery of the faith." Learning that Christian faith involves embracing a mystery is an essential part of catechesis. Gregory does not set out, in the remainder of the *Great Catechism*, specific propositions to which the catechumen should give assent, nor does he offer specific guidelines as to the manner of instruction. He does say forthrightly where the rubber (or in this case perhaps the wood of the chariot-wheel) meets the road: in the profession of faith at baptism.

In the first place, Gregory sets up the discussion of baptism by explaining what he believes is at stake. The instruction of catechumens teaches them to recognize "by whom [they are] born, and what kind of creature[s they become]" at baptism. That is, they are born again into Christ and take on his nature; being baptized into Christ makes them partakers of the divine nature, which alone has the power to save them. Gregory supposes that there is a choice being made at baptism:

What happens in ... baptism depends on the disposition of the heart of [the one] who approaches it. If [s/he] confesses that the holy Trinity is uncreated [s/he] enters on the life which is unchanging. But if, on a false supposition, [s/he] sees a created nature in the Trinity and then

¹² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/1, (Edinburgh, Scotland: T&T Clark, 1957), 199 & 343

¹³ Gregory, "An Address," 305. The absolute distinction plays a starring role in Gregory's theological epistemology as well as in his doctrine of God. See Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 193-194.

¹⁴ This is the characteristic of divine being that grounds the claim that God is present to every creature as the cause of its existence. See ST I, q. 44, a., 1; with reference to the Incarnation, see ST III, q. 2, a. 10, ad. 2.

is baptized into *that*, [s/he] is born once more to a life which is subject to change.”¹⁵

Leaving aside the question about the nature of baptism and what Gregory means by “the life which is unchanging,” I wish to draw attention to the onus of faith and understanding apparently placed on the catechumen. It seems as if Gregory is saying that the intellectual grasp of the doctrine of the Trinity is as important for baptism as the confession of faith in the Trinity. Without this understanding to accompany faith, the baptism seems not to “take”; it is not an effective Christian baptism. Failure to “believe that the nature of the holy Trinity is uncreated”—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit sharing in the uncreated nature—leads to a wrong turn in the life of faith. At first, this description of baptism and of the dire consequences of a misplaced faith seems harsh. To require such a precise and technical grasp of the proper terminology seems rather exclusive. Does it mean that people with learning difficulties cannot be saved?

The short answer here is no. Gregory approaches the problem with misunderstanding the nature of God with catechumens in mind; catechumens would have been reasonably intelligent people who would have been able to grasp the distinction Gregory describes in the passage quoted above. We must remember also that Gregory is addressing himself to catechists, not to the catechumens themselves. He insists that the *teaching* on Christian doctrine be perspicacious. The real burden does not rest on the shoulders of the one being baptized but on the one who has taught her.

Moreover, the aim of catechesis was not informative but transformative. Baptism marked the turn off a path leading to death, signalling repentance unto life.¹⁶ Thus, the crucial intellectual point here is not semantics but virtue: Gregory explains that “a person who brings himself under the yoke of anything created unwittingly puts his hope of salvation in that and not in God.”¹⁷ Intelligent catechumens needed to have their hope directed precisely to the Saviour who is fully God: “For only the one who had originally given [them] life was both able and fitted to restore it when it was lost.”¹⁸ Gregory demands a high level of precision and humility from teachers of the faith, but he does so for the sake of the spiritual growth of catechumens. The mystery does not preclude a certain hope but grounds it properly.

¹⁵ Gregory, “An Address,” 322 (*italics in original*).

¹⁶ We ought to note well that Gregory is speaking to us, readers and writers of theology: be clear and precise in your teaching, because it *matters*. Getting the terms right is not crucial in the way that the proper pronunciation of *wingardium leviosa* (along with the ‘swish and flick’) is essential for the efficacy of the spell. Getting the terms right is important for discipleship.

¹⁷ Gregory, “An Address,” 322

¹⁸ Gregory, “An Address,” 286.

This brings us back to Arius, and the question about the Trinity and Christian faith and practice. If Gregory had been in the room with me when I was asked, he might have helped me by reminding me that the doctrine of the Trinity teaches me who Jesus is. Without the doctrine of the Trinity, we would lose some of our best Christological hymns. To give just one example, we could no longer sing, “Amazing love, how can it be / that thou, my God, shouldst die for me?” Arguments about the Trinity, from Arius to Karl Barth, are never about semantics but about salvation. Our life in Christ is lived by the Spirit, in relationship to the Father. The way we conceive of the Trinity bears directly on the character of our faith and practice.

I hope that this answer would have satisfied the student who asked about the problem with the Arian heresy, but he might have followed up by asking about the place of doctrine in the Christian life. As I have indicated, Gregory addresses himself to catechists and assumes that the candidates for baptism will be intelligent adults. He says nothing of children, or of the mentally ill or infirm. What he says seems to imply that there is some minimum knowledge requirement. I have argued that this is not a requirement for salvation but a discipline for Christian hope. This leaves us with a crucial question: how can we say at one and the same time that the doctrine of the Trinity matters so profoundly if, in some cases, it doesn’t seem to matter at all? Gregory does not ask this question, but what he says about baptism invites us to consider it.

DOCTRINE AND INTELLECTUAL HUMILITY

The answer, I think, can be found in the words of St Paul: “For though we live in the world we are not carrying on a worldly war, for the weapons of our warfare are not worldly but have divine power to destroy strongholds. We destroy arguments and every proud obstacle to the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ” (2 Corinthians 10: 3-5). This passage is a complex one, in the midst of a complicated epistle. St Paul is concerned about various things that seem to be undermining the faith of the disciples at Corinth.¹⁹ St Paul writes, a little further on, “I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ” (2 Corinthians 11: 3). I argue that doctrine has a crucial role to play in the work of destroying strongholds, of taking every thought captive to obey Christ, and in the preservation of “sincere and pure devotion to Christ.” Before we can address the question about the cases in which doctrine seems not to

¹⁹ I cannot adjudicate the question whether 2 Corinthians is a “composite epistle,” but merely observe that the letter does not present a consistent argument or develop an organized and coherent set of themes.

matter at all, we need to take a closer look at how doctrine plays its role in the lives of the people Gregory had in mind.

Gregory would have recommended two “weapons” in the struggle to obey Christ: ascetic practice and the contemplation of Christian doctrine.²⁰ Gregory’s theological epistemology offers a very good example of the work doctrine does in the service of discipleship. Intelligent catechumens were bound to develop their own ideas about God; Gregory insists on an epistemological reserve that prevents those ideas from running amok. However catechumens might like to think about God, there are certain boundary-lines that human cognition can never cross.

The possibility of our thoughts leading us astray suggests that the intellectual dimension of our discipleship bears considerable weight. We might associate “sincere and pure devotion” primarily with the heart, as a matter of affection rather than reason, but Paul connects such devotion with “thoughts.” Hence, his insistence on “taking every *thought* captive.” As we endeavor to remember Jesus faithfully²¹ and remain true to his gospel in our daily lives, we grow in faith partly by striving to love God with our minds as well as our hearts. “Thought” also has a long history (in the Bible) of being inseparable from the movement of the heart. In Genesis, we find that “the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every imagination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). To take every *thought* captive to Christ involves the whole person: reason, imagination, and desire.²² Moreover, the way we think about God is not the same as the way we think about gravity or addition; it is more like the way we think about love. How we conceive of love shapes our actual loving. So also our conception of God guides our perceptions of and engagement not just with God but with all creation.

We need to realize as well that the intellect also faces the temptation to *libido dominandi*. Our minds strive for satisfaction and control, for an explanation that settles our questions and resolves every paradox. What deception did Paul fear, precisely? We cannot be absolutely certain, but the Arian controversy several generations later centered on an eclipse of the mystery, explaining Jesus’s status in a way that would make the doctrine of the Trinity make sense. Gregory

²⁰ Ascetic practice helps by reminding Christians that bodily longings not only prompt us to take care of physical needs but can also remind us of our soul’s need for God. Much more might be said about the place of ascetic practice in the Christian life, but my focus here is on the other ‘weapon’: doctrine. See Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, chapters 4 and 5. The whole of the fourth chapter is devoted to asceticism and the formation of the soul for Christian practice.

²¹ I owe this phrase, to which I return again and again in teaching systematic theology, to my teacher Mary McClintock Fulkerson.

²² See, for example, Richard Kearny, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

of Nyssa insisted upon an epistemological reserve, which always draws us back to the mystery. We hold in tension what we believe with what is apparent to sensory perception and our ordinary experience. In our experience, there is nothing that is both one and three, nothing that is fully divine and fully human. The mystery of God thus challenges reason and imagination. God incarnate is a stumbling block for the intellect; the oneness of God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, defies comprehension. For this reason, Rowan Williams's reading of Vladimir Lossky yielded the insight that "the doctrine of the Trinity is a crucifixion of the intellect."²³ Doctrine helps us to know what we can and ought to say about God and how we should express our faith in God and, at the same time, keeps us cognizant of our limitations. God is beyond all we can ask or imagine.

Thus, doctrine is a tool for us, to rein in the "imagination of our heart" when it has gone, or is at risk of going, astray. Less agile imaginations incur less risk. This does not imply that someone with a profound intellectual disability cannot know God. I mean, instead, that such an intellectual disability generally prevents one presuming to know God by reason of her own intelligence or capacity for abstraction. Cognitive impairment does not hinder anyone from approaching God, because God is the one doing the approaching!²⁴ People who understand less well remind us that we are always dependent on God to reveal God to us: we are all equally incapable of reaching up to heaven, even with our minds, to grasp the nature of the divine. Knowledge of God comes from God; we who are talented with words and ideas and imagination share with one another our conceptions of God, trying to explain to each other what it is we are talking about when we say "God." Still, our words and ideas and concepts and pictures all fail us. Not that we shouldn't try. We must, actually, speak of what we have heard and seen and experienced, but we must remember that all that we can conceive or imagine cannot hold God.

²³ Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 17. Myers uses the phrase in describing Williams's engagement with the thought of Vladimir Lossky. See also Rowan Williams, "Lossky, the *Via Negativa*, and the Foundations of Theology" in *Wrestling with Angels*, ed. Mike Highton (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2007), 1-24.

²⁴ See John Swinton, "Known by God," in *The Paradox of Disability: Responses to Jean Vanier and L'Arche Communities from Theology and the Sciences* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2010), and *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2012), especially chapters 5-10. Swinton gives a very good account of the way we are held by God, who secures us eternally against the disintegration of our being.

IMAGINATION AND DISCIPLESHIP

In what follows, I give an account of the relationship between our imaginative grasp of the mystery of God and our Christian discipleship by way of two key illustrations. In the first place, I want to ask: how do we imagine God? How does doctrine teach us to imagine God? My starting place is a text that will be familiar to readers: the Nicene (Nicene-Constantinopolitan) creed. "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, maker of heaven and earth." As a proposition, it tells us something about God; we affirm that we are in a particular relationship to God, and we recognize God as the Creator. Christian teaching is in the business of *explaining* to us what it is we articulate when we repeat the creed. Because we might imagine, if we took these words in isolation, that God was like an earthly father, who might be kind or stern or even cruel; we might imagine that God made heaven and earth as a sort of experiment or as a toy. Doctrine connects this phrase, which identifies the Creator, to those that follow, especially those that describe his coming in Christ Jesus, who suffered "for our sake." This alters our interpretation of the Almighty Creator. There is more to be said about God than this concept can communicate on its own.

Christian teaching also puts the Creed in the context of broader theological reflection. There is such a thing as our 'doctrine of God.' We find out something more about God when we look at the creed together with Genesis 1 and in light of what theologians (like Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine) have said about God. When we say that God created the heavens and the earth, we are saying that God brought into being everything that is, from nothing—*ex nihilo*. As Christian theologians, we explain further, that this understanding of God as creator implies that there is no violence involved in God's creation.²⁵ God does not have to overcome anything or anyone in order to bring the world into existence.

The picture of God that begins to emerge, as we put the Almighty Creator in context, is tender, compassionate, and magnanimous. If we read further into Scripture and tradition we would further enrich our picture of God. God is fully sufficient love; God does not create human beings because God needs our love. God's love for us is perfectly free (as Karl Barth said, God is the One who loves in

²⁵ One theologian who takes up this theme and makes it central to the whole of theology is John Milbank. The ontology of peace is one of the pillars of Milbank's theological project. See Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 113-117; I hope to return to the argument for the fruitfulness of the ontology of peace and the concept of active reception for theological reflection on Christian discipleship in future work. Milbank does not invent the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, of course: he draws heavily on Augustine, but the exegetical reasoning that delivers the doctrine of creation can be found throughout early Christianity.

freedom²⁶), and our response of love is likewise free: we love simply because God first loved us.

From even this rudimentary account of the Christian God, a picture of God as steadfast and generous love emerges. Such an understanding of God colors our experience of God and the world, and even ourselves. We interpret events differently, finding God at work where healing and peace are happening. We expect certain things from God in our own lives: healing and peace, and also conviction of our sin, forgiveness, direction, and wisdom. We *see* things differently. Doctrine provides a vision of reality. Tutored in Christian doctrine, we see strength in weakness and honor in humility; we see the cross as the symbol not of defeat but of victory. An imagination that has been nourished and chastened by the Church's teaching about God perceives the world differently.²⁷

My second illustration shows how this teaching changes the way we make sense of what is happening around us.²⁸ On visits to the disciples in Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (described in Acts 14), Paul and Barnabas "[strengthened] the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). Since Christians in those cities endured vigorous persecution, the news that tribulations signposted the way to the kingdom would have reassured believers that they were still on the path of discipleship. Like the encouragement Paul and Barnabas gave, Christian teaching is not a stern schoolmaster, standing over us, waiting to rap our knuckles with a ruler if we slip up. It is rather, as I suggested earlier, a gift, meant to aid us on our journey. Doctrine helps by guiding our imagination and giving us ways to make sense of our experience. If there is a sense in which doctrine "saves," it is only by pointing toward the One in whom we are saved. God gives the gift of doctrine to those who require it; God does not demand understanding of doctrine from those who do not need its discipline.

²⁶ This is a topic Barth discusses at length in the *Church Dogmatics* II/1, 300. God's freedom may look different from Barth's point of view, but divine freedom from necessity is a constant, and an idea Barth derived at least in part from his reading of Anselm. See Barth, *Anselm: Fides quaerens intellectum: Anselm's Proof of the Existence of God in the Context of his Theological Scheme* (London: Pickwick Press, 1960).

²⁷ Kathryn Greene-McCreight provides an excellent example of a doctrine-shaped imagination at work in her *Darkness is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness*, Second Edition (Michigan: Brazos, 2015). Chronicling and reflecting on her experience of mental illness, Greene-McCreight shows us the soul's path of discipleship as it passes through mental illness.

²⁸ I use Acts 14 and Luke 5 to make a similar point in Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, chapter 6.

I have argued that insofar as we *do* imagine God, we need our minds and hearts, our memories and our intellect, to be trained for the exercise of contemplation. The *insofar as* is important: doctrine is a gift for the lively and energetic mind, and a rule for those who are clever with words and ideas.²⁹ The breadth of our knowledge and the capacity of our imaginations can be put to the service of the gospel.

The ability to discern the mystery of God also involves a responsibility to recognize and to guard that mystery in every human being. Being formed for the vision of God—both to see God in the world and to behold God in heaven for eternity—must involve a deeper appreciation for God’s own image, found in each and every human being. Those who can grasp the principle of our creation in God’s image are to regard as brothers and sisters those who cannot grasp it. When our imaginations are impaired, our need for doctrine to help us “take every thought captive” decreases accordingly. In that situation doctrine has a different function. Then, doctrine teaches our companions how to regard us, how to hold us, how to make sense of our lives when we cannot make sense of them for ourselves.

BODY-BUILDING: INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY, DOCTRINE, AND CHRISTIAN VIRTUE

At the beginning of the paper, I suggested that the work of the doctrine-trained imagination was to remember Jesus faithfully. So far, I have talked mostly about the place of doctrine in the minds and hearts of individual Christians with reasonably capacious imaginations. In this, the final section of the paper, I argue that we go most seriously awry when we suppose that the business of perceiving what the Father is doing is something for which such individuals are primarily responsible. Thus, I shift the focus of the discussion in two ways. First, I say a bit about the Church as the faithful remember-er of Jesus. Second, I ask about the teaching function of the weaker members of the body—those with the least capacious imaginations. This can include people at both ends of life as well as those with cognitive impairments who are at various places in between.

If we think about doctrine primarily in terms of its function in individual lives, we get a skewed picture. Doctrine safeguards the knowledge of God for the whole Church, not just for *me*. The task of remembering Jesus faithfully has been entrusted not to individual Christians but to the body of Christ. The faith that saves is not the belief of individuals but the faith of the Church. The Church is constantly involved in meditation on the Scriptures in the light of past interpretation and in the face of new questions to which Jesus is the

²⁹ See Comensoli, “Recognizing Persons,” 264-267; and John Berkman, “Are the Severely Mentally Disabled Icons of Heavenly Life? Aquinas on Impairment,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 26, no. 1 (2013): 83-96.

answer, and new situations in which the Spirit's power is desperately needed. Together, we look to Holy Scripture and to those men and women who have opened the Scriptures to us through the ages, guiding us on the path of discipleship and leading us to a deeper knowledge of God. Theologians and all teachers of the faith bear the *Church's* memory. This should inspire both relief and dread! With the help of the Holy Spirit, those entrusted with the task of handing on the faith, must carry it so that it is intact, supple and resilient. The intellect must be brought to bear fully in the attempt to articulate Christian teaching in a way that keeps the mystery of faith.

Gregory of Nyssa would insist that we see clearly the place of such men and women within the body of Christ. He in no way idealizes or idolizes those people who are involved in the work of expressing the Church's teaching. For Gregory, the mouth (which is the part of the body he associates with teachers of the faith) is just another part of the body. When "the servants and interpreters of the Word"³⁰ faithfully articulate "good teachings" they benefit the whole body of Christ. Another set of Christians supersedes them: the "champions of the faith" whose lives testify to the gospel.³¹ Those who help the Church to remember Jesus faithfully serve those "champions"—not the other way around. Being a champion of the faith consists primarily in an exercise of obedience to Jesus: remembering him faithfully and yielding to the transforming work of his Spirit so that our lives proclaim his gospel.

In order to consider, finally, the function of doctrine in the lives of those who cannot grasp its nuances, we must consider our theological anthropology in the light of what I have argued thus far. The doctrine of God I set out in the previous section implies a particular understanding of human beings as creatures of the God who is generous and compassionate love. As such, the doctrine of God guides our consideration of our fellow human creatures. God the Creator is the source of life, hope and redemption. As the psalmist reminds us, "It is He who made us, and not we ourselves" (Psalm 100:3). A faithful understanding of what it is to be human begins with the affirmation that our primary relationship, the one that marks us as human beings, is our participation in God, the One in whom "we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28). Being human means being a creature of

³⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, *Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. Richard A. Norris, Jr., (Georgia: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012), 451; quoted in Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 215.

³¹ See his *Life of Macrina* (GNO VIII) and *On the Soul and the Resurrection* (PG 46), both translated by Anna M. Silvas in *Macrina the Younger, Philosopher of God* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2008).

God, first and foremost. The image of God identifies human beings among God's creatures, because *that's how God created human beings*: in His image.

So far, we have merely reiterated the basics of Christian theological anthropology. As the source of our existence and identity, God makes us who and what we are. We affirm that the gift of being in God's image is a gift freely given by God. Yet, quite often, we nevertheless attempt to identify with precision just what it is about human beings that constitutes the "image" and forget that it is not something we have to prove we are by the force of intellect or will.³² The point of theological reflection on our being created in the image of God must ultimately be, as with the Trinity, a contemplation of the mystery, not an attempt to solve a puzzle.

Not only is the doctrine of the Trinity a crucifixion of the intellect, but our doctrine of humanity is as well. We cannot understand how God is God, and a similar mystery is at the heart of what it means to be human. As with the sketch of Trinitarian doctrine we drew from Gregory's catechetical instruction, so also with our theological anthropology. In the latter case, "A studied examination of the depths of the mystery does, in a veiled way, give one a fair, inward apprehension of Christian teaching on the knowledge of human being. One cannot, of course, express the depth of the mystery in words, how the same thing is at once finite and yet participates in the infinite, how it is observed to have difficulty with moral behavior or intellectual concepts, and yet is enlivened by the breath of God, how it remains a physical body, yet reflects the image of the immortal, immaterial One."³³ The core of Christian theological anthropology is not an explanation of how human beings are the image of God, but the irreducible mystery *that* human beings are the image of God. Before that mystery, we must be equally careful about our imaginative craftiness. Here again, we must hold in tension what we know about human beings with what appears to us: the broken body of the person with a cognitive impairment nonetheless bears the image of God.

³² Rowan Williams captures this notion from another angle in his "The Suspicion of Suspicion: Wittgenstein and Bonhoeffer," in *Grammar of the Heart: New Essays in Moral Theology and Philosophy*, ed. Richard H. Bell (California: Harper & Row, 1988). See also Volpe, *Rethinking Christian Identity*, 52-56; Volpe, "'Taking time' and 'Making sense': Rowan Williams and the Habits of Theological Imagination," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 15, no. 3 (2013), 345-360; and Medi Ann Volpe and Jennifer Moberly, "'Let your light so shine': Rowan Williams and Dietrich Bonhoeffer," in *Engaging Bonhoeffer: The Impact and Influence of Bonhoeffer's Life and Thought*, ed. Matthew Kirkpatrick (Minnesota: Fortress Press, 2016).

³³ This is my adaptation of Gregory's summary of the teaching on the doctrine of the Trinity; see Gregory, "An Address," 273-74.

In the face of this mystery, we can ask a different question. Our temptation might be, if we were trying to solve a puzzle, ask *how* the person with a severe cognitive impairment *can be* in God's image, if freedom and rationality were the basis for our understanding the *imago Dei*. If we hold fast to the mystery of human being in the image of God, however, and begin *there*, our question becomes, "in what way does the person with a severe cognitive impairment reflect God's image?"

While addressing that question thoroughly is the topic for another essay,³⁴ I do want to suggest that being mindful of our own frailty is a necessary component of our discipleship and the *sine qua non* of spiritual growth. As for St. John the Baptist, so also for each of us, "I must decrease; he must increase." During the weeks between Christmas and Candlemas, the Church puts the fragility of human life and the humility of Jesus on constant display: our worship is framed by the crib and the cross. We should see Jesus in those whose vulnerability is like that of the newborn babe and whose fragility is like that of the crucified Lord. Drawing the imagination back again and again to the image of humility and brokenness has two benefits (at least). First, we are bound together in Christ, who was broken for us, as we remember that the broken bodies among us help us to remember Jesus faithfully. Second, the increase of humility that should be fostered by such reflection entails a decrease of all in us that crowds out the tender and compassionate love of God.

How would I now respond to the question about the shortcomings of Arianism? On the basis of what I have argued here, I would say that the doctrine of the Trinity helps us to remember Jesus faithfully and truly and guides our understanding of God's salvation through his incarnation, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven. At the same time, it indicates the irreducible mystery that attends all of salvation history. So, it is important for all of us involved in theological and catechetical work to fix our minds on it and allow it to penetrate our hearts and shape our imaginations. We, like that doctrine, will be fingerposts, living signs of the Gospel, and so should work to point as clearly and unambiguously as possible to the truth. Returning to 2 Corinthians, we are reminded that

we do not preach ourselves but Christ Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus' sake. For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.

³⁴ Berkman's "Are the Severely Mentally Disabled Icons of Heavenly Life?" takes up a related question and suggests that people with severe intellectual disabilities reflect a key aspect of our relationship with God.

But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the surpassing greatness of the power may be of God and not from ourselves. (2 Corinthians 4: 5-7)

For those of us inclined to forget that we have this treasure in earthen vessels, contemplation of Christian doctrine involves a crucifixion of the intellect, to turn us again and again back to the source of the light.³⁵

We may not be subject to the persecution that beset the churches Paul and Barnabas visited. Yet we need help in learning to pay attention to Jesus and “take every thought captive” to the obedience that was his. The difference that the obedient imagination makes is immense—something that David Foster Wallace reminds us as well as any theologian or spiritual writer of our day.³⁶ In his 2005 commencement address at Kenyon College, Wallace was talking about attention—but you might well think of ‘attention’ here as the imagination of the thoughts of our hearts. He says,

If you really learn how to pay attention, then you will know there are other options. It will actually be within your power to experience a crowded, hot, slow, consumer-hell type situation as not only meaningful, but sacred, on fire with the same force that made the stars.³⁷

David Foster Wallace stops short of identifying “the force that made the stars,” but we do not have to stop there. We have read Colossians 1 and the prologue to John’s gospel. We know (or ought to know) the pertinent verse of “The Servant King”: “hands that flung stars into space / to cruel nails surrendered.” This Jesus is our God: the force that made the stars. Finding him in the vexations of daily life and in the faces of our fellow human beings—with and without intellectual disabilities—is taking every thought captive to Christ. And *that* is what doctrine is for. **M**

³⁵ A note of clarification, in response to a question about this from Kathryn Greene-McCreight: the crucifixion of the intellect is not a sacrifice, in the sense that we give it up entirely. The intellect is crucified by the irreducible mystery of the faith, in order to belong fully to God and to be raised with Christ. The *via negativa*, from which this idea derives, is not an abandonment of doing theology. It suggests a theologically-rich silence filled with awe in God’s presence.

³⁶ See my Volpe, “The Virtue of Tenderness: David Foster Wallace and the Practice of Love,” *Church Life* 3, no. 4 (2015): 109-116.

³⁷ The YouTube video can be found at www.youtube.com/watch?v=8CrOL-ydFMI; the transcript is at web.ics.purdue.edu/~drkelly/DFWKenyonAddress2005.pdf.